

FEATURE REVIEWS

An Apology for Postcolonial Reason

Paul Lyons

Department of English, University of Hawai'i

On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism. By Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. xx + 327.

Following his death in 2007, responses to Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze's posthumously published *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* had a memorializing tone, and took place around spaces devoted to Africana Philosophy.¹ This was appropriate, given Eze's contributions through the establishment of the journal *Philosophia Africana*; through editing the field-mapping *Post-Colonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* and *On African Philosophy: An Anthology* (collections whose Prefaces define Africana philosophy inclusively and extensively as including the diaspora and its engagements over time, in part because diasporic thought has returned to inform intellectual movements); and through a series of works that argued for the ongoing need to mark and counter the racism that Eze identifies as "coloring thought" within Enlightenment philosophy and its legacies. It would be unfortunate, however, if *On Reason* were not engaged more widely within philosophical circles, for while the book claims to have "quite modest" intentions (p. xi), its implications for philosophy in the "Postcolonial Age" are potentially far-reaching.

Eze makes a compelling if largely implicit case that the figure of "Africa" in history as a multi-sourced crossroads of thought, and as a generative site of postcolonial philosophy, necessitates a rethinking of the often East-West coordinates of philosophy as a discipline. In the process, *On Reason* offers subtle reflections on Africana philosophy; on the question of how and where Africana philosophy's difference among the family of philosophical traditions might be located (in what "nonaccidental" forms of kindred thought [p. 137]); and on the persistent and irrational power of race to infiltrate thought in areas ranging from legal to pedagogical to medical ethics to the question of what constitutes philosophy. But Eze approaches these questions, purposively, from what seems the long way around: suggestions about how reason can be reconstructed for postcolonial thought follow from a thorough and technical breakdown of ideas about the constituent components of reason and rationality, and then a reconstruction through and against analyses of conceptions of reason that underwrite versions of colonial and postcolonial philosophy, including the Negritude movement.

Against what he sees as the grandiose assumptions informing these lines of thought, Eze proposes a model of reason based on minor, vernacular, everyday, or ordinary experience, and conceived of as provisionally distinct from politics and

religion. *On Reason* moves in alliance with postcolonial work like Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (which it never references): both Eze and Spivak maintain that Kant "foreclose[s] the aboriginal" and Hegel "put[s] the other of Europe in a pattern of normative deviations"; that postcolonial thought works within the danger zone of its cooptation by a diverse range of political projects; and that a new comparativism, cautious about re-inscribing ethnocentric bias, must nourish the idea of a planetary Commons based on respect for the diversity of languages of thought.² However, *On Reason* holds that a genuinely philosophical approach to reason should avoid the pre-positioning or Marxist/feminist *a priori* of much cultural studies work, and concern itself more with resituating the postcolonial subject tactilely in history as a reasoning agent. Flatly rejecting the classical and continental heritage in this process, or skirting the need to justify its own method, would amount to an evasion of philosophy. Rather, to the degree that Enlightenment ideals underwrote colonial reason, postcolonial philosophy should wind back its premises and compose new modes of reckoning with time. As signaled by the book's title/subtitle, the classical concerns of philosophy ("on reason") must meet and answer to the postcolonial condition (a "world of cultural conflict and racism") at the level of concepts.

In framing his project in the Preface, "What is Rationality?" and Introduction, "Diversity and the Social Questions of Reason," Eze seeks to engage the central philosophical problematic of the relation of particular and universal, and of the position of individuals within society. In ways that resist the description of African philosophy as a struggle to be recognized as a particular set of collective answers to philosophical universals, Eze insists that reason be reconstructed as "internally diverse and externally pluralistic" (p. 24).³ The internal diversity that he describes as "a necessary condition of thinking in general" (p. 3), "goes all the way down," percolating through cognitive acts and informing ordinary reason in the places where it emerges "out of its own historical fate" (p. 112). By external pluralism, Eze does not mean pluralism and multiculturalism as often debated—in fact, he regards arguments for tolerance and cultural comparativism as subdivisions of the logic of culturalism that press toward exceptionalism or relativism. (The conversation, he insists, should be about the assumptions that constitute the categories, or about how the representation of tensions among them disclose methodological choice and generate thought).

Eze pursues universalism, but not one that can be captured "from outside of everyday experience" and then, as an abstraction, reapplied (p. 10), a transcendental method that he presents as narcissistically subsuming objects into its own system. Further, in what Eze considers the "Afro-modern postcolonial vernacular tradition of thought," philosophical work is understood as "an evolving critique of abstractions common in one's society" (p. 11) in pursuit of freedom from assumptions that block the unfolding of individual and communal potential, through a method that appreciates diversity as the fate of the world. Method is not conceived as distinct from the liberatory aims philosophy serves. This view requires diversity as the generative condition of autonomy. Without choice there can be no exercise of reason; as in language, where a "breach of tongues" creates an epistemic gap, the reconstructive pursuit of absent objects requires and enables "freedom of thought and mind" (p. 9).

In this spirit, Eze describes reason as internally a theory with many layers and moving parts and externally as having infinite and changing scenes of application. Reason emerges both through negative critique (as the trace of what various ideas about reason exclude) and through a reconstructive model mindful not to attenuate the “affective timbre” of vernacular experience (p. 46). Chapter 1, “Varieties of Rational Experience” (the echo to James suggests the central and optimistic role the book assigns to the will in claiming that “humans *make* their own minds” [p. 84]), rotates and assesses the conceptions of reason that derive, in turn, from approaches labeled calculative and formal (Hobbes, Bacon), hermeneutical (Heidegger, Gadamer), empiricist (Hume), phenomenological (Husserl), transcendental (Kant), and “ordinary” (Lakoff and Johnson). Eze develops his preference for this last, more located, embodied, historically contingent view of reason in chapter 2, “Ordinary Historical Reason,” particularly in relation to language, through a discussion of varieties of pragmatism (Wittgenstein, Williams, Rorty, Dewey, Wiredu), enlisting Putnam’s theory of disquotationality as support for “a vernacular theory of rationality and truth telling” (p. 119). In chapter 3, “Science, Culture, and Principles of Rationality,” Eze shows how thinking in the shadows of race science—appealing to science based on anything other than the fact that DNA variance is as great within “races” as without—disguises unreasonable methodological choices in ways that it is the task of the postcolonial philosopher to clarify. To say, for instance, that more attention is now paid to Africa within philosophy than previously is to beg the questions of “*what* exactly changed and by *how much*” (p. 184) and of what changes might be required of thought were “Africa” not positioned as philosophy’s (and history’s) other, but as a vital center of its production.

Chapter 4, “Languages of Time in Postcolonial Memory,” portrays the emancipatory project that guided humanity away from colonial thought as both a rich answer to the questions above and as an incomplete project in which postcolonial philosophy seeks to uproot Enlightenment-inspired “modernist” ideas of freedom from the philosophical grounds in which they prove tenaciously rooted and to replant them within a historical consciousness more “attuned to the vernacular languages of history” (p. 183). Eze posits postcolonial literature (Achebe, Thiong’o, Soyinka) as a rich, complex field that can be harvested by philosophy in the reconstruction of its concept of the reasoning subject in history. Such imaginative works perform “existential repair” (p. 192), function as a “second handle on reality” (Achebe, quoted on p. 193), and, in registering the broken nature of time, norm “continuity of experience” (p. 197) as a human right. In facing the loss of cultural “treasures” out to the reader—in showing endangered languages to be cultural repositories storing history, traditional wisdom, and distinctive styles of thought—the writers reveal the constant threat to all reality and to processes of “world renewals” (p. 213).

The attendant postcolonial anxiety that an imposed foreign reality might subsume a community’s own differs entirely in its relations in history from existentialist crises over language, which Eze reads in Sartre’s *Nausea* as the running down of a view of reason that requires categories “powerful enough to guarantee . . . sovereignty over existence *with all the gain in the world but at no cost to the self*” (p. 221)—a fake

dilemma or “egocentric phenomenology” (p. 219) that Eze reads as entirely capitalist, modernist, and ethnocentric. Eze’s own humanism and pragmatism, however, lead him to question the countermove to re-inscribe the quasi-religious metaphysics of race/nation/culture, including the advocacy of essential Black difference. Eze questions the philosophical cost of this dimension of thinkers he admires greatly, such as Senghor and Du Bois, whose work he sees as otherwise pointing to ways in which Africana philosophy provides a rich arena in which “agential elements in the reception or rejection” of cultural heritage are accented and modeled for postcolonial thought (p. 145). Eze, in other words, advocates for ordinary innovation over instrumental, expressive, formal, or exceptionalist forms of reason, and emphasizes the benefits of preserving for philosophy “an autonomous space vis-à-vis politics” (p. 256).

The stakes of this argument for a “conceptual division of labor” (p. 244) emerge most clearly in chapter 5, “Reason and Unreason in Politics,” which appeared in a slightly revised form in *Africa Today* with the title “Between History and the Gods: Reason, Morality, and Politics in Today’s Africa.” Here Eze contends that the processes that inform everyday rational actions provide a better decision-making model than versions of reason reliant on the extraordinary or the exceptional, as well as a stronger answer to the primary question “To think or not to think?” that is the “the essence of the vernacular and practical universal” (p. 22). Reason emerges as the negation of its many others: radicalism, revolution, grandiosity, Manichean logic, sacralization, revelation, luck, mysticism, tragic redemption through art, emotionalism, miracles, irrationalism, charisma, or dramatic corrective acts. Social chiro-practices (spectacular, inaugurative adjustments) do not necessarily snap the times into joint, but potentially create long-term and chronic “back” problems; rather, the exercise of public reason as “ordinary” is more likely genuinely to transform common sense into good sense in terms of daily lived experience.

To reinforce this as a prescription, Eze reviews the philosophical justifications that guided the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Process in South Africa, and shows how they problematically echo conceptions of reason in post-apartheid novels by Coetzee, Krog, and Ndebele. Eze does not consider the TRC’s settlement as necessarily deficient, but finds its assumptions—including its mobilizations of the African concept of *ubuntu* (humanity)—to be, like those in the novels, overly aestheticized and quasi-religious—at once too much and not enough for philosophy (p. 234). He appreciates the senses in which, given that a strictly punitive enforcement of legal justice threatened the future, the settler society was guilty as a whole of crimes against humanity, from which it benefited materially, but could not all be incarcerated or expelled, while institutionalized forgiveness of the state by itself betrayed the memory and reality of the violated—a suspended “we forgive but we don’t forget” facilitated a transitional approach to justice. But Eze questions whether transition is preferable to transformation, and whether such a reliance on spectacular forgiveness ultimately fails to address ongoing race/class inequalities.

Eze grants that his own view of public reason as secular, participatory citizenship is open to the charges “leveled against it by defenders of premodern primordialism

or a postmodern irony" (p. 246), but he finds that these positions slip toward the prophetic on the one hand and circular narratives about power on the other. The Afro-modern rationalist tradition thus necessarily courses "between" such positions, while opposing suggestions that, if in Africa science, religion, art, philosophy, and morality sometimes blend together, Africa is therefore "unphilosophical." Philosophy, rather, should defend ordinary reason as the locus for restorative and transformational justice without "resorting to the spectacular tactics of most religious, artistic, and political movements in Africa" (p. 248). And it is in respect to this non-extraordinary understanding of struggle that "philosophy's own reason" should be pursued (p. 228).

Eze's injunction that philosophy begin where it is, and that it prize in vernacular traditions and local epistemologies their quiddity as forms of universal reason, strikes me as remarkably useful for postcolonial philosophy to the degree that it does not again "foreclose the aboriginal" in the name of a democracy-to-come. In Hawai'i, where this essay was written, Eze's approach to reconciliation, healing, and transformative justice might well be productively debated as a means of readdressing the illegal theft of Hawaiian sovereignty and the ongoing occupation by the American state, though to treat these issues as a philosophical problem of reason would certainly invite the gamut of challenges that *On Reason* anticipates. Those he considers as "tight culturalists" might regard any suggestion for relaxing core claims as simply an "indecent proposal" (p. 149). "Loose culturalists" might agree that *kānaka maoli* (native Hawaiians) have at all points in recorded history engaged in ordinary or practical reason (the crux of Gananath Obeyesekere's argument against Marshall Sahlins), while disagreeing that philosophy and religion/spirituality can or should therefore be even provisionally separated.⁴ Thus, as committed as Eze is to seeing the reasoning agent as embodied in history and entitled to self-determination on "continuity of culture," his argument might not allow true flexibility on these points. He would in the end have to insist that if ordinary reason is prioritized as a way of redirecting the rationales that sustain the cultural conflict and racism that colonialism created and exploits, it cannot as philosophy afford the exceptionalist aspects of tight-culturalist politics. In a plural society, he argues, scriptural arguments defend only the outlooks of believers.

In other words, to conduct the kind of thought experiment in Hawai'i that Eze encourages at several points in *On Reason* would seem to require imposing conditions. For cultural precedent to inform public policy it would have to be seen as a reasoned renewal of ways of thinking about being in the world that affirm the pragmatic value of indigenous philosophy for arriving at *pono* (correctness, justice, right, balance) and *ho'oponopono* (healing, making *pono* what is *hewa* [wrong]) while considering the well-being of non-*kānaka maoli* citizens. In turn, Eze's conditions of reconciliation would require of settlers the meaningful unlearning of epistemic privilege as a right of spoil and openness to ways of thinking that are underprivileged or foreclosed within the logics of the American state. The legal system that militarily defends these logics would have to be recognized as itself the agent of exceptionalist and quasi-religious, redemptive thinking, and the instrument of the dispossession of

kānaka maoli for the benefit of settlers. The workings of social institutions, in other words, would have to be reconfigured over time in such a way as to produce and support, not a dramatic, transitional, extraordinary justice (the exchange of land or cash reparations for forgiveness in a monumental deal involving the relinquishment of future claims, etc.), but a justice philosophically based on the reasoned transformation of the practices of everyday, ordinary life.

Notes

- 1 – See John Pittman, “Reading Reason with Emmanuel Eze,” and Ifeanyi Menkiti, “On Rationality and the Burden of the Ijele Masquerade: A Note on Emmanuel Eze’s Work,” in “Special Issue on Emmanuel Eze,” *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Spring 2008), <http://web.mit.edu/sgrp> (click on “Archive”); Zekeh S. Gbotokum, “Comments on E. C. Eze’s “Between History and the Gods: Reason, Morality, and Politics in Today’s Africa,” and Elias K. Bongmba, “Beyond Reason to Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Morality and Politics in Africa: Comments on E. C. Eze’s ‘Between History and the Gods: Reason, Morality, and Politics in Today’s Africa,’” in *Africa Today* 55 (2): 95–104; and Bruce Jenz, “Reason and Rationality in Eze’s *On Reason*,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27 (4): 296–308.
- 2 – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. ix. In *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), Spivak describes the “new comparativism” as a shift away from the Area Studies’ model of the subject, which historically defaults to national/regional norms. Without abandoning the reading practices, erudition, and commitment to languages that developed within this model, Spivak urges both a reconception of the subject (whose often mobile and always raced/gendered position must be tracked “without foregone conclusions” and less from “language to language” than from “body to ethical semiosis” [p. 13]) and attentiveness to the conditions of possibility that sanction the authority of those who speak on the subject’s behalf, whether the subject is an individual or a collectivity.
- 3 – Eze’s argument in this sense turns away from debates about ethnophilosophy in Africa, which Paulin Hountondji describes as a false alternative to putative irrationality that tends toward a reductiveness ironically driven by the methodologies of Eurocentric ethnology and serving its ends (Paulin J. Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa*, trans. John Conteh-Morgan [Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2002], p. 91). As in the works of Kwasi Wiredu, Eze’s directive regarding the universal/particularist problematic is on how thinkers might “combine insights extracted from [East and West philosophical sources] with those gained from . . . indigenous philosophical resources to create for ourselves and our peoples modern philosophies from which both the East and West might

learn something" (Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996], p. 153).

- 4 – Obeyesekere argued that a perceiver's embeddedness in culture does not "render discrimination impossible" (Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], p. 21); Sahlins countered with "different cultures, different rationalities"—that to assume a "commonsense bourgeois realism" was to retroactively impose the Enlightenment view of rationality brought by Cook (Marshall David Sahlins, *How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], p. 14). John Charlot stresses that, while in classical Hawaiian thought there was no "dualism between the material and immaterial," this did not attenuate the autonomy of reason in contemplating and modifying the world (John Charlot, *Classical Hawaiian Education: Generations of Hawaiian Culture* [Lā'ie, HI: The Pacific Institute, Brigham Young University, 2005], p. 90). In the fullest contemporary reconstruction of *kānaka maoli* philosophy, Manulani Aluli Meyer engages pragmatism and empiricism to discover "fundamental principles of knowing," which include "instinctive, innate or ancestral knowledge" (Manulani Aluli Meyer, *Ho'oulu: Our Time of Becoming: Hawaiian Epistemology and Early Writings* [Honolulu: 'Ai Pōhaku Press, 2003], p. 78) as part of a "triangulation of meaning" (see Meyer, "Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith [Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008], pp. 217–233).

Talk about "Barbarians" in Antiquity

Michael Nylan

History Department, University of California at Berkeley

Rethinking the Other in Antiquity. By Erich S. Gruen. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv + 415.

A new book in the field of Greek and Roman Classics has important implications for serious students of early and middle-period China as well.¹ As its title suggests, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* by Erich S. Gruen calls into question one of the reigning paradigms used by historians of the classical era,² asking whether scholars have not been over-eager to retroject postcolonial notions of the Other (the disparaged, disdained, demonized, and even subhuman)³ onto the antique world. To be clear at the outset: Gruen's book does not offer a blanket condemnation of postmodern